



Walsall Council

Minutes of the **ordinary meeting** of the Council of the Walsall Metropolitan Borough held on **Monday 15 April, 2024, at 6.00 p.m.** at the Council House, Walsall.

Present

Councillor C.D.D. Towe (Mayor) in the Chair

Councillors: G. Ali

A. Andrew

B. Bains

H. Bashir

M.A. Bird

C. Bott

P. Bott

R. Burley

S. Cheema

S.J. Cooper

S.K. Ditta

S. Elson

K. Ferguson

G. Flint

M. Follows

N. Gandham

A. Garcha

N. Gultasib

A. Harris

L. Harrison

A.J. Hicken

I. Hussain

K. Hussain

S.B. Hussain

T. Jukes

P. Kaur

R. Larden

N. Latham

E. Lee

R. Martin

R. K Mehmi

E. Morgan

K. Murphy

J. Murray

S. Nasreen

A.A. Nawaz

A. Parkes

K. Pedley

G. Perry

W. Rasab

L.J. Rattigan

S. Samra

K. Sears

P. Smith

C.A. Statham

M.A. Statham

M. Ward

J. Whitehouse

T. Wilson

R.V. Worrall

99. Apologies

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillors Gill, Hassan, A. Hussain, Nazir, Singh Sohal, Underhill, and Waters.

100. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 February, 2024 and Extra Ordinary meeting held on 18 March, 2024, copies having been sent to each member of the Council, be approved as a correct record.

101. **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

102. **Local Government (Access to Information) Act, 1985 (as amended)**

There were no items in private session.

103. **Mayor's announcements**

Death of Councillor Gary Clarke

The Mayor referred to the death of former Councillor Gary Clarke, a member of Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council from 1998 to 2023. The Mayor and Councillors Bird, Hicken, Ward, Nawaz, Smith, Worrall, Harris, and Andrew paid tribute to former Councillor Clarke, following which it was **moved** by the Mayor, duly seconded and:

Resolved

That this Council have heard with deep regret of the death of former Councillor Gary Clarke, a member of Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council from May 1998 to May 2023 and places on record their appreciation of his services to the borough over a period of many years and expresses its condolences to his family at this sad time.

Thanks to retiring members

The Mayor thanked retiring Councillors Allen, Horton, Nazir, Worrall, and Underhill for their services to the Council and the people of Walsall. Councillors Bird, Ward, and Nawaz gave remarks of thanks, following which, Councillor Worrall addressed the Chamber.

104. **Petitions**

The following petition was submitted:

(1) Councillor Worrall – To relocate the 5G mast on Parkstone Close

105. **Questions**

(a) From the public: A question submitted by Mark Brindley regarding knife crime was deferred to a future meeting.

(b) From members of the Council:

Councillor Smith

Given that there are four particular empty areas of land in the Coalpool / Ryecroft Area of the Blakenall ward, which have been unused for far too long, serving very little purpose other than to the litter droppers and the fly tippers: They being:

The Council owned site of the former Coalpool Library, Coalpool Lane.

The Council owned site of the original Neighbourhood Office (next to the Methodist Church), Coalpool Lane.

The Council owned site where Dartmouth House, mainly used by the NHS, once stood in Ryecroft Place, and

The site where the former Coalpool Clinic once stood on Ross Road (not Council owned)

and further given that local residents in this area are still concerned and indeed many angry, that on these respective sites the local community once had a Library, a Neighbourhood Office a NHS Health Centre and a Clinic and now have none of these and nothing to replace them,

will the appropriate Portfolio holder inform me and particularly the residents and shopkeepers of the Coalpool & Ryecroft areas, what he intends to do in order to ensure that these lands are brought back into use as quickly as possible with schemes/plans that contribute to the social and economic wellbeing of the community, and that have the support of the local community?

Councillor Andrew gave the following response:

The sites referred to are allocated for residential development in the council's sites allocation document.

The three council-owned sites are included in the council's disposal programme and pre-marketing work is underway. Stage 1 site investigations are underway on the sites which will identify the risks of abnormal development costs. Depending on the results of these desktop surveys, it may be advisable to undertake intrusive site investigations in order to assess the implications of the ground conditions on the development of the sites prior to the commencement of the marketing process. The advantage of having full site investigation reports is that bidders can more accurately assess the construction costs and submit

bids with more certainty and less risk to the council of deductions from the agreed purchase price.

Initial viability work undertaken on the sites has indicated that their viability for development is marginal, and this position would worsen if significant remediation and abnormal development costs are identified. The sites fall within the Bloxwich Town Deal area which benefits from the Construction Skills through Regeneration grant and potentially qualifies for funding to support the viability of development. The opportunity for securing funding will be pursued before commencement of marketing.

It is proposed that the sites will be brought to the market on completion of site investigations and, if applicable, grant funding applications with a view to achieving sales of the sites for the development of new housing. Our approach to the disposals will enable the purchasers to secure detailed planning consent for their proposed schemes before completing the purchases, therefore minimising the risk for the purchaser and maximising the certainty and receipt for the council.

Preparatory work is underway for the disposals and, allowing for all stages of the process, we would expect sales to complete, with detailed planning consent for the proposed developments in the 2025/26 financial year.

The Construction Skills through Regeneration funding may also be applicable to the former clinic site. Details of the funding opportunity has been sent to the landowner and we will endeavour to have positive engagement with them.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

Could the Portfolio holder give an assurance that when it is a little bit further down the line, hopefully not very long according to what you have said, 2025/26. You will ensure that there is full consultation with local residents of Ryecroft and Coalpool that involves the elected Members of the area and other peer leaders in that community. Until such time that things happen can the Council, please keep those sites that belong to the Council, clear of litter, particularly the site of the Coalpool Clinic.

Councillor Andrew gave the following response:

I am sure that the officers have taken it on board in terms of keeping these sites clear because, as we all know if there is one lot of fly tipping, it will encourage another and will make the job even more difficult. In terms of consultation, of course, that will be picked up through the planning process and local elected Members will be involved in that process. Should I still be here in this position, because I am up for election, I make my assurances that the local people will be involved in this process.

Councillor Worrall

With the consent of Council, the question submitted by Councillor Worrall regarding attendance by Members on the West Midlands Combined Authority's Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee was withdrawn.

Councillor Jukes

I recently visited a number of Walsall's Holiday Activity and Food programme (HAF) providers and had an excellent time seeing the services on offer through this provision. I believe the programme came about as a result of Marcus Rashford's End Child Food Poverty initiative created during the pandemic in 2020 when, after learning how many children miss out on meals during school holidays, Marcus successfully led a campaign to lobby the government to provide a £400m holiday meal and activity programme to support low-income families in England until the end of 2021. Food poverty for children is something Marcus still campaigns on today.

Here in Walsall the HAF programme provides school holiday activities for the Borough's children and ensures that all those who attend are fed healthy and nutritious meals. The HAF also provides parents with recipes which are healthy and cost effective to feed the family at home and will support families in accessing food banks if needed.

On one of my recent visits to the easter provision I was very distressed to have heard a conversation where a young child stated that they needed to 'fill themselves up' while at the session as they'd be 'having nothing' when they got home.

According to DfE sources, this funding is due to cease in March 2025. This will mean the HAF provision will likely not be able to continue across the Borough which would be hugely impactful on our children and young people, leaving many of them hungry over school holiday periods. We as a council cannot allow this to happen.

Firstly I would like to know if the Leader of the Council can confirm that there are plans for the funding to be stopped. If the funding is to be withdrawn, what are the administration going to do to ensure that these vital services remain in place for Walsall children?

Councillor Elson gave the following response:

We recognise the importance of the Holiday Activity Food Programme (HAF) and the difference this has made to children, young people, and their families in Walsall. During the life of the programme, the team have developed a HAF website and a portal where parents/carers can not only register their children for the HAF programme, but also provides them with access to additional help, support and services, including parenting programmes, financial support, special education needs and employment support available in Walsall. In addition, we also have the 'help with cost of living' information on the Council

website which includes where to find local foodbanks and how to apply for emergency support payments.

We continue to work closely with the Department for Education and await further information about future funding of the HAF programme, post March 2025. No formal decision has been made that the funding will stop after this date. Nationally there are a number of funding streams that could possibly be amalgamated next year. The 50 plus voluntary and community partners in Walsall who have embraced this programme and deliver amazing activities and food to children and young people are also considering sustainability and are actively seeking future viable funding. Given the success of the programme, the sector has developed and continues to grow and the HAF team, as part of the succession plan, are making contact with the resilient community's locality leads and external funding team to also support providers with information on any potential external funding opportunities.

We will be able to provide further information when we have received confirmation from the Department for Education about the future of HAF. At this moment in time, we are exploring all possible options to ensure that our children and families receive the help and support that they require, both now and in the future.

Councillor Ward

Can the council please confirm how many vacant properties across Walsall are paying double council tax, how many of these properties are housing association properties and what the breakdown is by individual housing association?

Councillor Bird gave the following response:

As at the beginning of April there are 590 properties subject to the long term empty property council tax premium. Of these, 104 are properties run by housing associations. GreensquareAccord have 77 properties, Clarion Housing Group 17, WHG 7, and then 3 others with just 1 each.

Councillor Ward asked the following supplementary question:

We are in a housing crisis at the moment and we have people in temporary accommodation, what else can the Council do to ensure that we bring these properties back in to use.

Councillor Bird gave the following response:

We are in discussions with the people who have these empty properties to make sure that they do turn them around as quickly as possible however, it is not uncommon for people having left a property in a state of disrepair, and those organisations have to put them back into a state of good repair, until then, they cannot let them. It is a bit of a double-edged sword I am afraid, but we are certainly putting pressure on all the people who have housing issues such as

this. The initial thing to hit them in the pocket is one thing, but you are quite right in saying we need to get these relet or, we can use CPO powers to the extreme.

106. **Mayor's use of authority to waive call in process – Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme.**

Resolved (by assent)

That the Mayor's use of authority to waive call in process, as described in Part 4.5 of the constituion be noted.

107. **Independent Remuneration Panel**

A report was submitted.

It was **moved** by Councillor Bird, seconded by Councillor Andrew and:

Resolved

That:

New Member special responsibility allowances (SRAs) were approved as follows:-

1. Cabinet Support Assistants (CSA)

A special responsibility allowance of 10% of the Portfolio holder SRA be paid to Cabinet Support Assistants. The current Portfolio holder SRA is £18,461 per annum therefore, the Cabinet Support Assistants SRA will be £1,846 for the 2023-24 municipal year. The payments to be backdated to 1st April, 2023.

2. Leaders Special Responsibility Allowance

- i) The Leaders SRA be increased by £2,000 a year to £38,647 to reflect additional responsibilities undertaken for the West Midlands Combined Authority; and
- ii) The additional £2,000 payment be backdated to 1 April, 2023.

Other allowances

3. Independent Chair of the Audit Committee

That the Independent Chair of the Audit Committee receives a SRA of £5,882. This payment be backdated to 1 April 2023.

4. Independent Members of Standards and Audit Committees

- i) That independent members on Standards and Audit committees should receive £750 per annum. This payment be backdated to 1 April 2023; and
- ii) It be noted that the £750 payment would not apply to the Chair if they receive the £5,882 payment for chairing Audit Committee.

Annual Uplift

It was agreed that the annual updating of Member Allowances should remain linked to the employees' pay award except where council staff agree a lower percentage rise, freeze or reduction. In circumstances, where the employees' pay award is a fixed value, rather than percentage, the annual updating will be actual percentage of increase received at scale point 43.

In accordance with procedure rule 17.6, Councillor Smith requested that the minutes record that he abstained from voting.

108. Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report

The Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report was presented to Council.

Councillor Elson and Councillor Jukes encouraged all members to attend Total Respect Training to assist them in their role as Corporate Parents.

It was **moved** by Councillor Elson, seconded by Councillor Andrew and:

Resolved

That the Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report be noted.

109. Scrutiny Annual Report

The Scrutiny Annual Report was presented to Council

Councillor Murray highlighted the work of the Councils Overview and Scrutiny Committees and thanked elected Members, Officers, Partners, and Democratic Services for their support during the year. Councillor Nawaz added his thanks.

It was **moved** by Councillor Murray, seconded by Councillor Bird and:

Resolved

That the Scrutiny Annual Report be noted.

110. **Portfolio Holder Briefings**

Wellbeing, Leisure, and Public Spaces

Councillor Flint gave a presentation.

Members asked questions in relation to the presentation which were responded to by Councillor Flint.

Customer Engagement

Councillor Ali gave a presentation.

Members asked questions in relation to the presentation which were responded to by Councillor Ali.

Street Pride

Councillor Murphy gave a presentation.

Members asked questions in relation to the presentation which were responded to by Councillor Murphy.

At this point in the meeting, the Council sat as charitable trustees. When considering the following item Council procedure rules did not apply.

111. **Annual Report of Barr Beacon Trust Management Committee**

Councillor Andrew thanked Members, Officers, and litter pickers for their support during the year.

It was **moved** by Councillor Andrew, seconded by Councillor Bird and:

Resolved

That the Annual Report be noted.

The meeting terminated at 7.50 p.m.

Mayor:

Date: